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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR HANFORD MEETS WITH DPM VU KHOAN

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: During a February 21 meeting, IRF Ambassador Hanford and Deputy Prime Minister Vu Khoan agreed that the recently concluded Human Rights Dialogue will help to spur on further positive developments in the bilateral relationship. On the issue of religious freedom, Ambassador Hanford acknowledged progress, but cautioned that problems remain. In particular, we are concerned about local officials in the Northwest Highlands. DPM Khoan recognized that these problems must be addressed, but nonetheless urged the USG to remove Vietnam's CPC designation as soon as possible. DPM Khoan also noted that Vietnamese public opinion does not always welcome U.S. efforts in the areas of human rights and religious freedom, and that both the United States and Vietnam have to recognize that certain localities have special circumstances, cultures and traditions that must be respected. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) United States Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom John V. Hanford, accompanied by Ambassador Marine, met February 21 with Deputy Prime Minister Vu Khoan. Responding to Ambassador Hanford's positive comments on the spirit and content of the recently concluded bilateral Human Rights Dialogue (HRD) (septel), DPM Khoan said that the HRD was a success and would help to lead to positive developments in the bilateral relationship. The DPM praised Ambassador Hanford's efforts to improve mutual understanding through his candid and constructive discussions during previous visits to Vietnam. The year 2006 will have many important bilateral events, and it is the responsibility of both the United States and Vietnam to clear the way for a successful Presidential visit in November, DPM Khoan said.

¶3. (SBU) Ambassador Hanford expressed his commitment to strengthening bilateral ties, particularly in light of this year's historic events. In the past, religious freedom was a bilateral irritant, but, thanks to the efforts of the Prime Minister, DPM Khoan and others, the problem is in the process of being removed. DPM Khoan responded that it is natural for Vietnam to make efforts to improve the human rights and religious freedom situations for its citizens, and not just because of the HRD with the United States. Over the past year, the area of religious freedom has seen many improvements. For example, Vietnam's ties with the Vatican continue to improve, and a Catholic Cardinal visited in December 2005 to ordain 57 new priests in Hanoi. Protestantism is also flourishing, and there are many new churches, congregations and pastors. Furthermore, the GVN made the decision to publish bibles in two languages for ethnic minority practitioners in the Central Highlands. This decision was made based on respect for the faiths of the Vietnamese people. The DPM expressed his hope that the

USG and Ambassador Hanford will acknowledge new developments in Vietnam's policies and recognize the GVN's efforts to facilitate the HRD. Because of Vietnamese public opinion and the opinion of the National Assembly, it is sometimes not easy to find a policy consensus, he explained.

¶4. (SBU) Ambassador Hanford responded that, during the HRD, he acknowledged the important developments taking place in the area of religious freedom. For example, many of our religious prisoners of concern have been released and the practice of forced renunciations has almost entirely been eliminated. The GVN has also taken steps to facilitate the practice of a number of different religious groups. Taking care of the issue of Vietnam's designation as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) will require continued efforts, but we are committed to resolving this, preferably before the President's visit. The President watches this issue closely, and the USG would like to eliminate the problem of religious freedom in Vietnam as a bilateral tension. We have seen over the past several months that dozens of churches have reopened, but we would like to see hundreds of those previously closed to reopen, Ambassador Hanford said.

¶5. (SBU) CPC is a stumbling block on the path of bilateral cooperation, DPM Khoan observed. We should move it out of the way as soon as possible. Vietnam is grateful for the commitment to resolve the CPC issue comprehensively, but there are also larger issues we need to address. For example, the United States and Vietnam have had a complex history, and, while we are fortunate that the past is behind us, some negative sentiments remain today. Both countries thus need to avoid actions that make people look back on the past. For example, when USG officials meet only with Government opponents or religious leaders, it sends the wrong message. It would be better for USG officials to witness the reality of religious life in Vietnam by visiting a pagoda or a church service. This would allow the USG to understand that religious practice is normal in Vietnam.

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Given this normality, it is difficult for Vietnamese citizens to understand criticism of Vietnam's lack of religious freedom. It is important to understand the feelings of the Vietnamese and for the United States to work closely with Vietnam to earn the people's support for further developing bilateral relations. As hard as it was to win Vietnamese public support for the Bilateral Trade Agreement or WTO, it is even harder to bring people around to support this human rights and religious freedom dialogue process, the DPM noted.

¶6. (SBU) Ambassador Hanford rejoined that on three previous visits to Vietnam, he was able to visit both churches and pagodas and meet with Government-approved religious leaders. It is true that many Vietnamese enjoy a high level of religious freedom. Provided we are able to continue to resolve our issues of concern, the USG is prepared to argue in favor of CPC removal and prepared for the criticism it would subsequently receive. The Secretary is very interested in religious freedom and had a good discussion with FM Nien on this matter in Busan last November. While there have been improvements, problems also remain, although they are decreasing. For example, one problem appears to be with local authorities, particularly in the Northwest Highlands, and less so now in the Central Highlands. Even Vietnam's own Commission on Religious Affairs, during a visit to the Northwest Highlands, heard from local officials that there are no religious practitioners in their region. GVN efforts to educate local officials will make the difference in this matter. Vietnam's new legal framework on religion provides increased latitude for believers and, as more groups are able to register, people in the United States will recognize the improvements, and criticism will decrease, Ambassador Hanford stressed.

¶7. (SBU) The U.S. Congress and the National Assembly play an

important role, DPM Khoan observed. The better each legislature understands each other, the easier it will be for the two countries to work together. The incident Ambassador Hanford cited may have happened, and Vietnam has policies to address this. If local authorities act improperly, then there has to be a solution to deal with it. However, it is important for Vietnam and the United States to take into account that localities have their own cultures and traditions we need to respect. At the same time, local officials need to take into account the special characteristics of local traditions and cultures. Problems that arise are like a small-scale clash of civilizations. One the one hand, Hanoi demands that local authorities obey and conform to central government laws. On the other, Hanoi has to be aware of special local circumstances. We should be patient. If we are in a rush, it may lead to unnecessary social tensions, DPM Khoan said.

¶8. (SBU) Another issue of concern is the need for previously closed churches to be reopened and legally registered, Ambassador Hanford said. Although the situation in the Central Highlands is improving, authorities in the Northwest Highlands appear to be resisting. We are hopeful that the positive efforts of the Ministry of Public Security and the Commission for Religious Affairs will help to spur on improvements over the next four to six months, and that churches will in greater numbers be able to register.

¶9. (SBU) Vietnam has a plan to work on these issues, DPM Khoan noted. That some churches have had difficulty opening should not be construed as GVN policy. Not being able to build a church because of lack of land is not the same as the GVN forbidding the construction in the first place. In any event, the HRD will help both countries to understand each other better. DPM Khoan expressed his hope that Ambassador Hanford would continue to do everything possible to fully deal with the CPC issue. In addition to CPC, Vietnam's WTO aspirations will demand much work from the United States and Vietnam. At present, there are a large number of foreign and American companies seeking to do business in Vietnam. Vietnam and the United States will also work hard this year to ensure that APEC is a success, DPM Khoan concluded.

¶10. (U) Ambassador Hanford cleared this message.

MARINE